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AULARD'S POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION¹

WHAT is commonly known as the French Revolution is perhaps the most difficult theme that a historian can select. One attempting to treat it encounters every obstacle and pitfall that beset the way of those that endeavor to make the present understand the past. There is much doubt as to where the Revolution began and as to when it ceased. There is a bewildering mass of sources in regard to certain matters and few or no sources for others. Every form of violent partisanship—religious, political, social and philosophical—must be constantly reckoned with. Everyone took a hand—kings foreign and domestic, courtiers, national assemblies and their innumerable committees, local revolutionary bodies, communes, deputies on mission, *émigrés*, priests juring and non-juring, clubs, orators, newspaper editors, pamphleteers—and to each of these active forces must be assigned its proper influence on the course of affairs. Finally, on no occasion in recorded history were so many changes effected or suggested in so many fields of human interest in so short a time as in France during the ten or fifteen years following the opening of the Estates General in 1789. The most radical political, social, economic, religious and educational reforms were associated with unprecedented popular excitement and disorder, with foreign and civil war, defence, aggression and diplomacy, to such a degree as to render any coherent treatment of the whole range of events practically impossible. Some writers have, like Carlyle, taught their readers frankly to exult in the boundless chaos, in “the disimprisoned anarchy bursting up from the infinite deep, raging uncontrollable, immeasurable, enveloping a world in phasis after phasis of fever-frenzy.” Others have, like Taine, seen France swallowing a fatal draught, suddenly falling to the ground, foaming at the mouth, delirious and convulsed. In general it may be said that those who have attempted to deal with the Revolution as a whole have been more impressed by the disorder and the futile clamors than by the permanent achievements of the time; and yet these

¹ The French Revolution: A Political History, 1789–1804. By A. Aulard, professor of letters at the University of Paris. Translated from the French of the third edition, with preface, notes and historical summary, by Bernard Miall. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910. Four volumes: 367, 322, 392, 334 pp.

achievements, which were many and fundamental, are what give the study of the Revolution its special value.

To many intelligent readers who have been led to regard the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror as essentially one and the same thing M. Aulard's book will come as a revelation. He makes no attempt to include in his political history descriptions of the dramatic events, often unimportant in their effects, which fill the pages of most histories of the Revolution. He assumes on the part of his readers an elementary notion of the general course of affairs, and he confines himself in his narrative to two fundamental matters: the development of democracy in France and the origin, progress and fate of the republican form of government. In his preface he says:

I propose to show how the principles of the Declaration of Rights were put into operation, between the years 1789 and 1804, in the institutions of the period; how they were interpreted in the speeches, by the press, in the policies of the various political parties and by the manifestations of public opinion. Two of these principles, the principle of the equality of rights and that of popular sovereignty, were those most frequently invoked during the elaboration of the new state politic. They are, historically, the essential principles of the Revolution—variously conceived and differently applied as they were, according to the times. The chief object of this book is the narration of the vicissitudes which these two principles underwent.

For the military, diplomatic and financial history one must look elsewhere, as well as for accounts of the successive "days" in Paris and the atrocities in the provinces. M. Aulard's account is, as he frankly admits, limited; but the older accounts were also limited in their neglect of the important matters which he makes clear. From his standpoint, the revolutionary history falls into four epochs: 1789–1792, during which democratic and republican parties were formed under a constitutional monarchy; 1792–1795, during which a democratic republic existed; 1795–1799, the period of the bourgeois republic; and 1799–1804, that of the plebiscitary republic. It has been quite commonly assumed by those who have dealt with the Revolution that they might regard their task as completed if they brought the reader down to the establishment of the Constitution of the Year III or perhaps to that of the year VIII. M. Aulard does not leave us until the empire is established; and he thus renders possible a proper conception of the whole general movement.

The author has for many years been engaged in the study and publication of material relating to the period in question, and there is no reason to suppose that anyone in the world knows more than he about

the sources. He has edited two great series of documents, relating to the Jacobin Club and to the Committee of Public Safety; he has conducted an important periodical devoted to the French Revolution; he has written several valuable monographs, including an elaborate account of the conditions in Paris under the Consulate; and he has been regularly giving instruction in this field at the Sorbonne. He may justly claim to be fully acquainted with his sources, for, as he says, "it is quite possible for a man in the course of twenty years to read the laws of the Revolution, the principal newspapers, correspondences, debates, speeches, election reports and the biographies of those who played a part in the political life of the time." He is, however, by no means overwhelmed by his resources, and he shows admirable judgment in the selections which he reproduces for his readers. He is always close to the sources, yet always clear and orderly.

M. Aulard's work appeared some ten years ago, and it is high time that it found its way into English. Mr. Miall has not only translated the original, as slightly revised in the third French edition, but has supplied a brief (and commonplace) preface, a useful summary of events at the opening of each volume, some biographical notes and, very rarely, a foot-note of his own. None of these would indicate that he has any special knowledge of the matters in hand. He may be forgiven for seeming to mistake Suarez for a Frenchman and for spelling his name "Suarès"; but he ought to have known that it was not the chief business of the *parlement* to register the king's edicts, and he should have ascertained how the delegates were elected in 1789 before attempting to explain the matter to M. Aulard's readers. Mr. Miall's knowledge of French and English remains to the end a mystery to one who compares his translation with the original. In the main he has reproduced, at times awkwardly, at times clearly and even deftly, the author's meaning; and yet every now and then he makes the most unexpected blunders. *Exemplaires* becomes "examples"; *affaires*, "affairs"; *pouces carrés*, "square thumbs"; *impression* (obviously in the sense of printing), "impression"; *à moi* (help!), "to me"; *nous autres*, "we others." *Scrutin* is consistently translated "scrutiny"; and he accordingly alludes to "scrutiny of presentation" and "definitive scrutiny"—phrases which might perhaps have been safely rendered by "nomination" and "election." *Droits réels* becomes "substantial rights"; *debiteur*, "debitor"; *censuel*, "manorial." Considering the general success of the translator, we can only assume that at times he permitted himself to be careless. M. Aulard says, at the opening of his third chapter:

Nous avons vu que, dans la Déclaration des droits, discutée et votée du 20 au 26 août 1789, il y a implicitement toute la République démocratique et sociale. On se garda bien d'appliquer tous ces principes, d'en tirer toutes les conséquences.

Why should Mr. Miall chose to give us the following cumbrous version of this clear and simple passage?

We have seen that in the Declaration of Rights, debated and voted on from August 20-26, 1789, an entire republic, democratic and social, is implicitly immanent. But the men of the time were careful not to apply all its principles, were wary of consummating all its consequences.

Happily M. Aulard's style is very simple indeed ; he has little need of technical terms ; and consequently the translator succeeds, in spite of some heedless renderings, in presenting to the English-reading public a fairly exact and readable version of a really extraordinary historical treatise. In its original form, M. Aulard's work is in a single stout octavo volume containing some 800 compactly printed pages. It is listed at twelve francs. It appears in English in four highly convenient and well printed volumes, but at a cost—eight dollars—which will interfere with its wide circulation. It should form a part of even the most modest collection of books on the French Revolution ; indeed it may be regarded as the one indispensable work in beginning such a collection.

Partisanship, or, at least, heat and rhetoric, have so constantly marred histories of the French Revolution that one constantly marvels at M. Aulard's imperturbable fairness and moderation. He seems to have no inclination to deal damnation round and quite as little to exalt Mirabeau, Danton or Carnot into heroes. This may surprise some who have formed a notion of M. Aulard's polemical powers from reading his attacks on the "*fantaisiste*" Taine. It is quite true that M. Aulard has dealt brutally and perhaps somewhat unfairly with poor Taine ; but there were extenuating circumstances. Then there has been a suspicion that his connection with the municipal government of Paris would necessarily imply an undue partiality for the Paris commune in 1793. There is, however, practically no trace of polemic in the work under review, and if its author has any unreasonable devotion to the Jacobins he has completely suppressed it in his account of them. M. Aulard has always shown himself a loyal supporter of the present republic ; and no one can better afford to deal fairly with the Revolution than a Frenchman who has followed with sympathy the victories of the Third Republic over the successive dangers that have threatened it during the

forty years of its existence. A modern French republican has less reason for fearing the whole truth about the Revolution than has the royalist or clerical. He can always urge that the excesses of the Revolution were due to the perversity of those who blocked essential reforms in their own selfish interest, and who did not hesitate to plot with foreign monarchs. Moreover, as Camille Desmoulins and others pointed out at the time, the severities and disorders accompanying the establishment of the republic were as nothing compared with the violence, cruelty and perfidy to which kings and popes had been wont to resort in order to maintain their power. M. Aulard seems to write with a calm conviction that there is nothing to conceal, nothing to apologize for, nothing to defend, attack or palliate. Indeed, he refrains in general from any comments whatsoever and contents himself with presenting to his readers the evidence which enables them to follow the history of opinion and public policy in France in all its variety, with all its contradictions and bewildering mutations. This evidence is largely first-hand and takes the form of excellently selected extracts from addresses, newspapers, reports, letters, memoirs *etc.*

M. Aulard devotes his first two chapters to democratic and republican ideas before and at the outset of the Revolution. These are interesting even to one who is familiar with his main conclusions, namely, that those writers who proclaimed the "sovereignty of the people" had no notion of universal suffrage in the modern sense: "a thing so strange to the thinkers of the eighteenth century that it had not as yet even a name"—at least outside of England.

When, therefore, we find writers stating that the people is sovereign, they mean a portion of the people, that portion which owns property and is literate—the middle class, the *bourgeoisie*. The division of the nation into two classes, the property owners and the proletariat, active and passive citizens, had already been established in theory when the Constituant established it legally.

No one dreamed of founding a republic; few had any admiration for that form of government; and even those few agreed that it was wholly impossible in a great state like France, in a process of unification. The word "republican" was popularly applied to a certain type of radical, much as the words "socialist" and "anarchist" and, formerly, "atheist" have been attached to persons who appeared to be out of sympathy with the commonly received views of politics or religion.

The way in which the universally accepted belief that France must remain monarchical was steadily undermined by the conduct of Louis

XVI and his advisers is the main theme of the first volume. It is astonishing to note the extreme reluctance with which even radical and progressive spirits first began to entertain the idea that perhaps a republic was inevitable, in view of the king's conduct and the attitude of the foreign powers, who expressed themselves willing under certain circumstances to intervene to check reform in France. After the return from Varennes, the republican sentiments, which the king's flight had aroused, quickly and completely subsided. France was at last painfully goaded, in September, 1792, into proclaiming its first republic. Such an outcome was in no sense the aim of any party that existed in 1789 or 1790.

The first half of volume ii is taken up with a careful account of the actual establishment of the First Republic. The latter part of volume ii and the first half of volume iii contain a most interesting study of the revolutionary government during what is commonly known as the Reign of Terror. Here the writer is at his best. No one, perhaps, has given so clear and impartial an account as M. Aulard of the motives that actuated the policy of those called upon to rule France during this frightful crisis. He makes no effort to describe the campaigns and revolts, except in their immediate effects on public opinion and on the policy of the various bodies which had a part in the control of affairs. His history of the legislation relating to the constitutional and administrative organization is very complete, and he finds space for an admirable account of religious matters—the process of dechristianization (so heartily deprecated in its more extreme forms by many of the radical leaders of the time), the worship of reason, the final separation of church and state in September, 1794, and the reestablishment later of the liberty of worship. His study of the Girondists has in it much that will seem novel to those familiar only with the earlier legends in regard to this party—legends which have proved so enduring. He treats its leading men with the same scrupulous fairness which he shows in dealing with the Mountain. His descriptions of Marat, Danton, Robespierre and the rest are wonderfully pertinent. Let us take an extract from his account of Robespierre :

All political activity should, according to Robespierre, tend to establish the reign of virtue and confound vice. He reasoned thus: those who are mistaken are vicious, those who are virtuous are right; error is a corruption of the heart, it cannot be sincere but must always be deliberate. There can be but two parties: good citizens and bad citizens. Conclusion: all those who do not think as we do must be eliminated from the state; they are evil intentioned and unsociable people. . . . There is but one fundamental

political truth. He who departs from it, be it ever so little, is an enemy of the people. And how is this narrow line of truth to be distinguished? It will be apparent to anyone who is right at heart. Moreover, Robespierre is quite ready to point it out to the people; one need only follow him, for he is and must be the minister and dictator of truth. . . . He assumed the appearance of never changing but changed nevertheless. A monarchist before August 10th, he was a republican after September 22nd. He followed the movements of the populace far more than he led them. For this reason he seems to us to-day an hypocritical demagogue, but also because he is always pointing to the desirable rather than to the possible. He says what ought to be done but never tells how to do it. He loved his country and humanity; he was ready to die for the people. But he adored and constantly revealed his own *ego*. His hatreds were as eternal and inexorable as those of Madame Roland. If this magnanimous woman prevented the Girondists from becoming reconciled with the Montagnards, this magnanimous man prevented the Montagnards from becoming reconciled with the Girondists.

M. Aulard pays somewhat special attention to the appearance of what he calls "*socialisme*," by which he appears to mean all suggestions for a radical readjustment of property. The "agrarian law" seems to have been the term originally applied in France to vague hints of a communistic redistribution of land. The Convention exhibited such a horror of these hints that it passed, with unanimous and enthusiastic applause, in March, 1793, a law imposing the death penalty upon anyone who should advocate the "agrarian law," or any other law subversive of landed, commercial or industrial property. Woman's suffrage was advocated now and then but excited little interest; it elicited nothing more than an occasional easy rebuttal, along what may be called the-mother-of-the-Gracchi line of argument, perfectly familiar, in a less classical form, to us to-day.

The last volume of the English edition begins with Babeuf and closes with the establishment of the Empire. It contains much that is interesting. A single passage will indicate the author's detachment in describing the rise of Bonaparte to power :

Since it had begun to conquer, the army, like the nation, instead of defending simply, had learned to love conquest for conquest's sake; first for the sake of glory, then for the sake of booty. . . . The army hated kings and Bourbons and continued to shout "*Vive la République*," "*Vive l'égalité et la liberté*," but it no longer had the love of civil liberty at heart. Having carried out a *coup d'état* at the instance of the civil authority, of mere obscure civilians, why not bring about a *coup d'état* of its own for the benefit of its own glorious generals? "The civil leaders"—so the army argued—

"feed us badly and clothe us badly; but the military leaders lead us to glory and gain; they love and understand us; and they have proved, moreover, by the organization of their conquests that they understand civil matters as well as military." Now it happened that the most admired of these leaders, Napoleon Bonaparte, was at the same time a great general and a great military orator, and thus he seemed to realize in himself the old ideal of the French race.

In closing his work M. Aulard expresses the belief that an impartial narration of the events of the revolutionary period leads to certain conclusions. (1) It is a mistake to believe that the French Revolution was effected by a few distinguished individuals. It was the work of the French people, not as a multitude but in effective organized groups. (2) The Revolution was only partially completed and was suspended during the rule of Napoleon; for the education of the people was the aim of the republicans, while on the contrary it was a part of Napoleon's despotism to discourage the people from learning and reasoning. (3) It is an illusion to regard the men of the First Republic as a generation of giants. They were obviously no more competent or remarkable than the generation which preceded or the one which followed. (4) The term French Revolution has constantly been used to include two quite different things :

On the one hand the principles which underlay the Revolution and the acts conformable to them; on the other hand, the period during which the Revolution was taking place and all the acts of the time, whether they were in harmony with the spirit of the Revolution or opposed to it.

M. Aulard continues—and let us permit him to develop his thought in his own words :

Cette confusion était aussi nuisible à la vérité qu'utile aux partisans de la politique rétrograde, en ce qu'elle permettait d'attribuer à la Révolution considérée comme une sorte de personne historique les actes les plus fâcheux ou même les plus contre-révolutionnaires. . . . Cette façon abusive de parler: *la Révolution a fait ou n'a pas fait telle chose*, a eu pour effet de faire voir dans la Révolution une espèce de puissance incohérente, capricieuse, violente, sanguinaire. On a essayé ainsi de discréditer les principes mêmes de la Révolution, surtout par les soins et au profit de ceux qui considèrent ces principes comme *sataniques* et qui voudraient gouverner la société par des principes opposés. D'ailleurs tous les parties politiques, dans le XIX^e siècle, ont plaidé leur cause par des arguments tirés de faits quelconques, advenus entre 1789 et 1799, et ils ont appelé ces faits, pris au hasard ou ingénieusement choisis: *la Révolution française*. Je pense que maintenant

les termes sont éclaircis: la Révolution consiste dans la Déclaration des droits, rédigée en 1789 et complétée en 1793, et dans les tentatives faites pour réaliser cette déclaration; le contre-révolution, ce sont tentatives faites pour détourner les Français de se conduire d'après les principes de la Déclaration des droits, c'est-à-dire d'après la raison éclairée par l'histoire.

The spirit of this passage clearly dominates and directs the whole of M. Aulard's presentation of his complicated theme, but it does not lead to any serious distortion or suppression of the essential facts that are connected with the issues to which he has chosen to confine himself. M. Aulard has been accused of being "*l'historien de la défense républicaine*;" of accepting the revolution "*en bloc*," including Robespierre, Lebon and Carrier and the last three months of the Reign of Terror; of merely reproducing the various apologies and justifications which the Jacobins offered at the time in extenuation of the atrocities for which they were responsible before God and a horror-stricken world. Only by carefully selecting just those sources that support his thesis and neglecting all those that exhibit the actual facts and conditions is he able, according to his hostile critics, to render his work a contribution to democratic propaganda; and this, they declare, is his determining motive and dearest aspiration.¹ It is certainly true that his book gives the reader a greater sympathy with certain of the revolutionary leaders than he would get from other works, but this sympathy is the result of understanding their motives and appreciating their situation. Indeed, nothing was more urgently demanded by historical students than a careful account of just what the conspicuous men of the Revolution believed themselves to be about. And this is just what M. Aulard has explained with incomparable lucidity. His point of view is one with which most of his English-speaking readers will have little tendency to quarrel, and they cannot fail to derive the greatest benefit from a careful perusal of his remarkable treatise.

JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON.

¹ Cochin, A. La Crise de l'histoire révolutionnaire, Taine et M. Aulard, 1909. This is a very ingenious and instructive pamphlet, well calculated to exhibit the irreconcilable sentiments that exist in France in regard to the ever living issue of "*La Révolution*."